

Cameron County Courthouse
1150 East Madison,
Brownsville
Cameron County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3272

HABS
TEX,
31-BROWN,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

CAMERON COUNTY COURTHOUSE

HABS TEX, ³¹~~30~~-BROWN, 4-

Location: 1150 East Madison Street, Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas, occupying a block bounded by East 11th Street, East 12th Street, East Madison, and East Monroe.

USGS East Brownsville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14/650730/2865720.

Present Owner: Cameron County, Texas.
(Judge R. A. Ramon, County Judge.)

Present Occupant: Cameron County.

Present Use: Courthouse.

Significance: Cameron County Courthouse, designed by prominent San Antonio architect Atlee B. Ayres, in 1912, is the second Cameron County Courthouse building. It is notable for its academic architectural detailing and striking interior which features a three-story rotunda topped by a stained-glass dome. Lavish plaster ornamentation used in the interior is reminiscent of that used by Louis Sullivan and the Chicago School.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The cornerstone bears the date 1912.
2. Architect: Atlee B. Ayres, who died on November 6, 1969, in San Antonio, was one of the most eminent architects in the State of Texas, and in partnership with his son Robert had designed many of the major buildings in San Antonio and elsewhere in the State. Atlee Bernard Ayres was born on July 12, 1873, in Hillsboro, Ohio. His family moved to Texas about 1879, settling in San Antonio in 1888. In 1890 Mr. Ayres went to New York where he studied architecture at the Metropolitan School of Architecture which was connected with Columbia University. He also studied at the Art Students League and took painting from Frank Vincent Dumont. After his graduation in 1894 he began working for San Antonio architects, among them a man named Coughlin who had come to San Antonio from New York. Ayres also practiced architecture in Guadalajara, Mexico, for about two years, returning to San Antonio in 1900 to open his own practice. He was joined by his son Robert in 1924, and the firm became Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres. In 1926 Atlee B. Ayres published a book on Colonial Architecture in Mexico entitled Mexican Architecture. Ayres and two other architects were instrumental in securing passage in 1937 of state legislation for the licensing of architects. Subsequently, Ayres himself received Texas License No. 3. Ayres was a charter member of the Texas Society of Architects, and at one time he was appointed by Governor James Ferguson to serve as State Architect.

Ayres was made a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in Washington, D. C. in 1931, when he was fifty-eight years of age. He was delegated by Secretary of State Cordell Hull to represent the United States at the 16th International Congress of Planning and Housing in Mexico City in 1938, when he was sixty-five, and then continued to practice full-time for another quarter of a century. At the time of his ninety-third birthday in 1966 the American Institute of Architects felt that he was probably the oldest practicing architect in the United States. Today his firm continues its many years of successful practice under the direction of his son and former partner, Robert M. Ayres.

According to D. B. Alexander, Professor of Architectural History at the University of Texas at Austin, the work of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres is characterized by their academic approach to design and their superb handling of detailing, both of which are in evidence in the Cameron County Courthouse. The Ayres office worked on a variety of projects encompassing office buildings, commercial structures, educational buildings, and residences. Their work includes the Smith-Young Tower Building (1929), the Administration Building at Randolph Field, called the "Taj Mahal," (1931), the Municipal Auditorium (1923), the Plaza Hotel, and the Federal Reserve, Groos National, and Frost National Banks, all in San Antonio; Carothers Dormitory and the Pharmacy Building at the University of Texas, and the Institute for the Blind, in Austin, as well as courthouses in Kingsville, Alice, Refugio, and Del Rio, Texas. In Brownsville, Ayres was the associated architect for a high school and for a ward school. Ayres and his son also designed numerous residences including the residence of John Nance Garner in Uvalde, Texas, and the residence of Marian Koogler McNay in San Antonio (1932), and now the McNay Art Institute.

While the Ayres partnership was accomplished in the execution of buildings in a wide variety of styles, their most striking work incorporates Spanish Colonial features and the geometric decorative work associated with American architecture in the 1920s and the 1930s.

The work of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres received widespread contemporary coverage and was published in American Architect, the Architectural Record, and Pacific Architect. (The Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals lists several entries for their work, and most of these periodicals and articles are on file in the office of Robert M. Ayres.)

3. Original and subsequent owners: The Cameron County Courthouse is located on Lots 1-12, Block 122 of the Original Townsite of Brownsville. Cameron County acquired this property in 1912. The transactions were recorded on May 13, 1912, in Volume 18, pages 465-467, Volume 20, pages 286-287, and Volume 21, pages 58-60. These Deed Records are found in the Cameron County Clerk's Office, Brownsville.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers, etc.: The courthouse cornerstone names Cross Construction Company as the contractor. According to the Cameron County Engineer's Office a search for more specific information about the construction of the building was conducted when the building was remodeled in 1965, and nothing was found.
5. Original plans, construction, etc.: The original plans and drawings are located in the office of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres, 664 GPM South Tower, San Antonio. Floor plans, sections, elevations, and interior details are included in HABS photocopies. The cost of construction was \$250,000. (Welch & Nance, p. 278.)
6. Alterations and additions: The third floor of the courthouse, with the exception of the rotunda and the second-floor courtroom, have been extensively remodeled. In 1965 Bowman, Swanson, and Heister of Brownsville, Texas, remodeled the two-story courtroom by putting in a floor to create offices on the third floor. On the second floor, a courtroom and central jury room were created from the original courtroom space and restrooms were added. On the third floor, six offices, a reception room, and a conference room were created.

In 1968, Swanson, Heister, Wilson, and Boland remodeled the remaining third-floor space by dividing it into a county court of law, reception area, public hearing room, county judge's chamber, coffee bar, attorney's conference room, and jury room. Two restrooms were also added. Jim Heister was the partner in charge of both remodeling jobs.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Cameron County was organized in February 1848. It was named for Ewen Cameron, born in Scotland in 1811 and killed in Mexico in 1843. Cameron was a leading figure in the Mier Expedition to Mexico, organized in a response to Mexico's invasion and temporary seizure of San Antonio in 1842, emphasizing its 6-year refusal to recognize Texas Independence in 1836. A counter-invasion of 750 Texans, including Cameron, left San Antonio in November 1842, led by General Somervell. Many of the expedition withdrew along the way, and when the remaining 250 reached the town of Mier across the Rio Grande, about 100 miles above Matamoros, they were overwhelmed and captured by the Mexican forces. It was here in Mier that Cameron led an unsuccessful but brave escape attempt, for which every tenth man was condemned to die, or take his chances of survival in a black bean lottery called the Black Bean Episode. Those who drew white beans were to be spared. Although Cameron drew a white bean, he was still shot on orders of General Santa Anna, for his part in leading the escape attempt. Survivors were released after two years.

Cameron County was carved out of Nueces County and originally consisted of 3,300 square miles including the present counties of Willacy and Kenedy. It is the southernmost county in Texas. Brownsville was designated the county seat in an election held on August 7, 1848.

The first permanent county courthouse was erected at the corner of East Twelfth and Jefferson streets in 1886. The construction was supervised by S. W. Brooks and cost \$60,000. This two-story brick structure was used by Cameron County until 1912 when the present courthouse was built. The original structure is now used as a Masonic Temple and is owned by Rio Grande Lodge #81AF7 AM. (Webb, Vol. 1, p. 168, and pp. 274-277. Printed information in the Cameron County file at the Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, Texas.)

C. Sources of Information:

1. Original architectural drawings: The original plans and architectural drawings of the courthouse are in the office of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres, Architects, 664 GPM South Tower, San Antonio, Texas, 78216. Relevant sheets have been photocopied for HABS.
2. Old views: An exterior photograph of the courthouse before the air-conditioning equipment was added can be found in Atlee B. Ayres, FAIA, and Robert M. Ayres, AIA, Architects.

3. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Biographical File on Atlee B. Ayres in the American Institute of Architects' Library, Washington, D. C.

Biographical File on Atlee B. Ayres in the Barker Texas History Center, Sid Richardson Hall, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas.

Cameron County File at the Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, Texas.

In interviews with Mr. Calvin Walker, of Swanson, Heister, Wilson, and Claycomb, Architects, 1801 Central Blvd., Brownsville, Texas, on July 13, 1977, Mr. Walker explained the 1965 and 1968 remodeling of the courthouse by his firm and also furnished copies of their plans for those alterations.

In interviews with Mr. D. B. Alexander, Professor of Architectural History, University of Texas at Austin, on July 7, 1977, Mr. Alexander contributed general information about Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres and about their work.

In interviews with Mr. Robert M. Ayres of Atlee B. Ayres and Robert M. Ayres, Architects, on July 5, 1977, Mr. Robert Ayres, who was the son of Atlee Ayres and his partner from 1924 until his death in 1969, furnished drawings for photocopying. He also furnished biographical information on Atlee Ayres and information on the buildings they worked on together.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Atlee B. Ayres, FAIA, and Robert M. Ayres, AIA, Architects.
This was privately printed and illustrates the work of the firm. It also contains advertisements from various contractors and suppliers who worked with the architects. According to D. B. Alexander, the book was probably printed in the 1930s and served as a brochure for the firm. A copy is available in the office of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayres, Architects, in San Antonio, and in the Archives of the School of Architecture, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Branda, Eldon S., ed. The Handbook of Texas: A Supplement,
Vol. III. Austin: The Texas Historical Association, 1976.

Webb, Walter Prescott, Editor-in-chief. The Handbook of Texas.
Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952.

Welch, June Rayfield, and J. Larry Nance. Courthouses of Texas.
Dallas: G. L. A. Press, 1971.

Withers, Daniel. San Antonio: A History of Color and Graphics.
San Antonio: San Antonio Conservation Society, 1977.

Prepared by: Betty Bird
University of Virginia
Project Historian
1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This large brick and terra cotta public building displays a fine interior rotunda with art-glass dome. Much of the plaster relief ornament is reminiscent of the decorative work of Louis Sullivan and the Chicago School.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The rectangular plan, approximately 100 feet by 120 feet, has three stories above an elevated basement.
2. Foundation: Foundations are concrete throughout.

3. Wall construction, finish and color: Walls are of brown brick in running bond, with terra-cotta trim. A terra-cotta water table extends around the perimeter with brick banded courses through the first floor. The banding consists of six brick courses alternating with one recessed brick course. At the second-floor line is a terra-cotta band extending around the perimeter. The second and third floors have recessed brick panels inset between brick pilasters and between second- and third-story windows. Above each of the entrances on the matching facades, and between the brick pilasters, there are set two tall tapered terra-cotta half-columns, with matching quarter-column at each side, each capped with a terra-cotta corinthian capital. The pilasters also have terra-cotta corinthian capitals, and together with the half-columns support a terra-cotta architrave and denticulated cornice. A brick frieze above the cornice has cast-iron ventilating grilles and terra-cotta brackets which support a second terra-cotta cornice. Its surmounting parapet holds, over each entrance, a cresting of a terra-cotta cartouche bearing the inscription "1912." An inscription in the frieze of the architrave above the columns runs "CAMERON COUNTY COURTHOUSE." A granite corner stone is on each exterior corner of the building.
4. Structural system, framing: The structural system is of reinforced concrete and steel.
5. Chimneys: None of visual merit.
6. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: There is a rectangular, projecting, flat-roofed entrance porch at the center of each facade, the front face having triple portals, each with flat arch, and rusticated pier jambs in terra cotta, the large central portal flanked by a smaller portal at each side. In the ends of each porch there is a window-like terra-cotta framed opening. The porch is approached from street level by seven granite steps in a rank slightly wider than the porch, with a terra-cotta rail and pedestal at each side, and iron handrails marking the approach path to the central entrance portal. The porch ceiling is of plaster, and has a plaster cornice with a terra-cotta band beneath it. To the right of the porch on the northeast facade there is a concrete bulkhead, with concrete ramp and steps leading into the basement.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Beyond each central porch portal on each facade, the entrance has a deep recessed stone surround and an arched, beveled glass transom. Each of the large, heavy wooden framed double doors has a full-length beveled glass panel, surrounds of wood, brass threshold, brass hardware, and a large brass kick plate.

The double-leaf wooden paneled door to the basement through the bulkhead has an iron gate across it on the exterior. This door has wooden surrounds.

- b. Windows and shutters: Double wooden windows between the brick pilasters have one-over-one lights in single-hung sashes behind a superior transom. Windows have terra-cotta exterior surround and wood interior surrounds. There is a terra-cotta lintel and a sill with an additional wooden sill. There are brick spandrel panels between windows on second and third floors. Wooden windows in the basement have one light, top-hinged, projecting sash, wooden surrounds, and iron bars over the exterior. Some windows have been removed and the openings plastered over.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The flat roof has a built-up asphalt covering over a concrete deck and a brick parapet with roof drain. There is a flat roof with asphalt covering over the porches, and a hatch with a shed roof of wood.
- b. Dormers, cupolas, towers: In the center of the roof is an octagonal lantern with galvanized iron louvres around the brick walls. It has a built-up roof on the sloping panels and metal gutter. Above the lantern is an octagonal skylight with sloping wire-glass panels. Horizontal metal louvres face the walls of the skylight.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: The basement under the entire building houses offices and mechanical equipment.
 - b. First floor: The entrance in the center of each facade opens into a corridor that leads into an octagonal rotunda. At the left and right of the northwest corridor is a stairway leading to the upper floors. Each of the quadrants around the rotunda contains offices.
 - c. Second and third floors: Second and third-floor plans are similar to those of the first floor, with a passageway around the open well of the rotunda. Offices radiate from the rotunda passageway.
2. Stairways: The two principal stairways are alike with the exception that only one leads to the basement. The steel, closed-string, dog-leg stairway has marble treads and risers, leading to each floor. The decorative cast-iron grille that forms the balustrade railing extends from a large cast-iron newel at the basement to a newel at the landing and continuing to the third floor with newel at each landing and floor.

At the third floor, the iron railing turns and ends at a half-newel at the wall. The newels have a pendant extending below the ceiling at each floor and landing. A wooden handrail is mounted on top of the iron railing. The same cast-iron baluster railing and handrail protects the wells of the rotunda. There is a metal spiral stairway from the second floor to the roof, with a pipe handrail. The stair formerly extended to the basement.

3. Flooring: Flooring in the corridors and rotunda is black and white mosaic ceramic tile, bordered and patterned, with a marble base. Some offices have vinyl-asbestos tile floor covering and many have carpet. The floor in the basement is concrete.
4. Walls and ceiling finish: Walls and ceilings are plaster. There is a marble wainscoting on the first and second floors and in the stairways. Some offices have modern wood paneling on the walls. The dome over the rotunda is art glass with decorated plaster ribs. Of particular importance to this building of Atlee B. and Robert M. Ayre is the Sullivanesque plaster decoration evident on each floor, and on the soffits of archways leading from the rotunda into office areas. There are pilasters at the intersection of the angles of the octagonal shape with plaster capitals. On the first floor, each of the floor corridors leading into the rotunda has a coffered barrel vault ceiling of plaster. Each rib leads down to a pilaster that has a plaster capital. There are plaster cornices at the ceilings. Arched openings into the rotunda have Sullivanesque plaster decoration on the faces and soffits of the arch. Walls in the basement are brick and wood paneling and ceilings are exposed concrete structure.
5. Doorways and doors: Most doors are wooden panel with a glass panel in the top with patterned, frosted-glass transom. The wooden architrave is a wood panel-like trim with plinth blocks. Some doors are modern aluminum store-front types with metal thresholds.
6. Special decorative feature, trim, and cabinet work: In the corridor on the first floor, each door to an office is in the center of the coffered panel in the ceiling. The plaster Sullivanesque decorated ribs between the coffers extend to the walls ending at a corinthian capital on top of a pilaster. In the center of each coffer is a large fronted-glass sphere lighting fixture. The plaster arch over each face of the octagon on the third floor has Sullivanesque decoration and an ornate shield at the keystone.
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: A modern heating and air-conditioning system is in operation throughout the building.

- b. Lighting: Most offices have modern lighting fixtures. Second-floor lighting fixtures are white glass globes that are fixed in a decorative plaster bracket series. In the center of the dome there is a hanging light fixture with twelve branches depending from a central frosted-glass bowl, each branch tipped by a smaller frosted-glass globe.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The courthouse sits in the center of the block, bounded by East 11th Street on the northwest, East 12th Street on the southeast, Monroe Street on the northeast, and Madison Street on the southwest. There are parking areas on all four sides. There is a landscaped area on the southeast and northwest sides, with numerous palm and ebony trees. A concrete sidewalk extends around the perimeter next to the building, and another sidewalk at the perimeter of the parking area. There are residential, commercial and office properties across the streets.

Prepared by: John P. White
Texas Technological
University
Project Supervisor
1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

At the suggestion of a national preservation consultant, Ellen Beasley, this project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, in cooperation with the Brownsville Historical Association and the Brownsville City Planning Department. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1977 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Brownsville, Texas, by John P. White (Associate Professor, Texas Technological University) Project Supervisor; Betty Bird (University of Virginia) Project Historian; and Student Assistant Architects Scott Deneroff (University of Maryland), Susan Dornbusch (University of Virginia), Matthew Lowry (University of Pennsylvania), Eduardo Luaces (University of Florida), and Alan Willig (the City College of the City University of New York). Special assistance and support were provided to the HABS team by Mrs. Mary Simmons, Mrs. Sally Fleming, Miss Theresa Champion, and Mr. Calvin Walker of the Brownsville Historical Association; and by Mr. Mario Moreno, Mr. Richard Waldman, Mrs. Graciela Salinas, and Mr. Larry Brown of the Brownsville City Planning Department. Archival photographs of the project were made in February 1979 by Bill Engdahl, of Hedrich-Blessing, Chicago, Illinois. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.